

Great Wagon Road



Imagine that you are living in the 1700s. You have come to America from Europe to buy some land and have a better life. You've been looking for land in Pennsylvania, but not much is left. You hear that there's good farmland farther south in the colony of North Carolina. But getting there won't be easy. Cars, trains, and planes haven't been invented yet. That leaves horses, oxen, and your own two feet. The problem is there are few roads. And you must take your family and everything you own with you. What will you do?

In the mid-1700s many settlers moved south from Pennsylvania on an old Indian trail that became known as the Great Wagon Road. They traveled in Conestoga wagons, sturdy covered wagons that were pulled by four to six horses. The trip was very hard.

At first the Great Wagon Road was narrow, muddy, and uneven. It improved as more settlers used it, but the journey was still long, slow, dusty, and bumpy. Wagons got stuck in the mud and were damaged from hitting large rocks and logs in the road. Travelers had to look for water and most of their food along the way, but they kept going until they found a place to settle.

The Great Wagon Road brought many settlers to central North Carolina between 1735 and 1775. By 1775, 209,550 people lived in the colony. That was six times the number of residents in 1730! Most of the people who settled in the Tar Heel State were Scots-Irish, German, and English immigrants from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. They established towns such as Bethabara, Bethania, Salem, Salisbury, and Charlotte along the road. Many of them started farms, and others set up businesses.

The Great Wagon Road eventually stretched from Philadelphia to Augusta, Georgia, about 735 miles. You can travel in the footsteps of early settlers on the Great Wagon Road today, as parts of the old road are now modern roads. Highway 311 from Madison in Rockingham County to Walnut Cove in Stokes County, for instance, follows the route of the old road.

And while you're "on the road," visit Old Salem in Winston-Salem to learn about the Moravians, a German religious group that came to North Carolina from Pennsylvania on the Great Mountain Road. Tour the historic community of Old Salem, which the Moravians founded in 1766. See how they lived, worked, and

played. You can even sample some of the foods they ate. Then try to imagine getting there by covered wagon on the Great Wagon Road!